

Wellness Notes

Developing Social Support:

(How to Cultivate a Network of Friends to Help You through Rough Times)*

Part I

Family ties, friendships and involvement in social activities can offer a psychological buffer against stress, anxiety and depression. Social support can also help you cope better with health problems.

Cultivating social support can take some effort. Here's how to develop and maintain strong and healthy social ties.

Understanding the Importance of Social Support

Social support isn't the same as a support group. Social support is a network of family, friends, colleagues and other acquaintances you can turn to, whether in times of crisis or simply for fun and entertainment. Support groups, on the other hand, are generally more structured meetings or self-help groups, often run by mental health professionals.

Simply talking with a friend over a cup of coffee, visiting with a relative, or attending a church outing is good for your overall health. If you have a mental illness, these connections can help you weather troubled times. Your friends and social contacts may encourage you to change unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking. Or they may urge you to visit your doctor when you feel depressed, which can prevent problems from escalating.

Social support can also increase your sense of belonging, purpose and self-worth, promoting positive mental health. It can help you get through a divorce, a job loss, the death of a loved one or the addition of a child to your family.

And you don't necessarily have to actually lean on family and friends for support to reap the benefits of those connections. Just knowing that they're there for you can help you avoid unhealthy reactions to stressful situations.

Some people benefit from large and diverse social support systems, while others prefer a smaller circle of friends and acquaintances. In either case, it helps to have plenty of friends to turn to. That way, someone is always available when you need them, without putting undue demands on any one person. You don't want to wear out your friends.

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